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# As Mission Shifts in Iraq, Risks Linger for Obama

By **PETER BAKER**

WASHINGTON — The official end of America’s combat mission in Iraq next week will fulfill the campaign promise that helped vault **President Obama** to the White House, but it also presents profound risks as he seeks to claim credit without issuing a premature declaration of victory.

As columns of vehicles crossed the border and troops arrived to happy homecomings last week, Mr. Obama released a restrained written statement and made a one-sentence reference at a pair of fund-raisers. While some called it the end of the seven-year war, Mr. Obama sought to avoid the sort of “**mission accomplished**” moment that haunted his predecessor.

But the White House wants to find a way to mark the moment and remind voters just two months before midterm elections that he delivered on his vow to pull out combat forces. Mr. Obama plans to make a high-profile speech on the drawdown next week, and aides are discussing whether to have him meet with returning troops. Vice President **Joseph R. Biden Jr.** will address the Veterans of Foreign Wars in Indianapolis on Monday.

The symbolism of the departing troops that played out on network television masked the more complex reality on the ground. Even as the last designated combat forces leave and the mission formally changes on Aug. 31 to a support role, 50,000 American “advise and assist” troops will remain in the country for 16 months more, still in harm’s way and still armed for combat if necessary. What’s more, Iraq’s future remains fraught with challenges amid a stubborn political impasse and a continuing low-grade insurgency.

“Political posturing is the norm in Washington, and claiming victory and an end to a war is far more popular than bearing the burden of leadership and dealing with reality,” **Anthony H. Cordesman**, a military specialist at the **Center for Strategic and International Studies** in Washington, [wrote on the center’s Web site](#) on Friday. “The Iraq war is not over and it is not ‘won.’ In fact, it is at as critical a stage as at any time since 2003.”

Denis R. McDonough, chief of staff of the [National Security Council](#), said the administration had no illusions.

“Does anybody believe the violence is going to stop entirely and the opponents to stability and progress in Iraq are going to stand down? No,” he said. “But we do know that the Iraqi security forces are in a position to take that role on themselves increasingly.”

The official transition from Operation Iraqi Freedom to Operation New Dawn is as much a change in labels as it is a change in mission. With violence far below its peak in 2006 and 2007, American forces have increasingly taken a back seat to the Iraqi security units they trained.

But after seven years of a war started by President [George W. Bush](#) on the basis of false intelligence, the desire for finality, and perhaps closure, has focused attention on this moment and provoked a fresh discussion in Washington about what it all has meant.

After hundreds of billions of dollars, more than 4,400 American military deaths and at least 100,000 Iraqi civilian deaths and perhaps many more, was it worth it? Did toppling a dictator and nursing a fledgling if flawed democracy make a difference? And did the United States salvage credibility by sticking it out and finally stabilizing Iraq even if not winning the clear-cut victory originally envisioned?

“If we can’t have a victory parade, we at least ought to be able to make some definitive conclusions,” said [Andrew J. Bacevich](#), a military specialist at [Boston University](#) who lost a son in Iraq and has written a new book, “[Washington Rules: America’s Path to Permanent War](#).” “And it just doesn’t seem that we are going to do so. We want to just move on, sadly.”

In part, that owes to the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan, where Mr. Obama is sending more troops, as well as the fragile economy at home, where millions of Americans are looking for work. And so while his opposition to the Iraq war animated his early candidacy, it seems almost a secondary issue these days.

During a fund-raising speech in Ohio last week, for instance, Mr. Obama mentioned the Iraq transition only in passing. “We are keeping the promise I made when I began my campaign for the presidency: by the end of this month, we will have removed 100,000 troops from Iraq, and our combat mission will be over in Iraq,” he said, a line he later repeated at a fund-raiser in Miami.

As they mark the moment, Democrats generally make no mention of the troop buildup and strategy change ordered by Mr. Bush in 2007, which many credit with turning around the

war and making it possible to end combat now. By the time Mr. Bush left office, he had sealed an agreement with Iraq to withdraw all American troops by the end of 2011. After taking office, Mr. Obama ordered an intermediary deadline of drawing down to 50,000 by the end of this month.

Mr. Bush showed up unannounced at the Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport earlier this month to greet troops returning from Iraq. While no news media were invited, [video posted on YouTube](#) by troop supporters showed him in casual clothes shaking hands and posing for pictures with troops as they entered the terminal one by one.

Mr. Bush has declined to discuss the mission change, but former advisers see it as a validation that after all the pain and the blood, Iraq may finally be in a better place, governed by a freer, more democratic system that could yet serve as a model in an otherwise largely authoritarian Middle East.

“We can take a certain measure of satisfaction from the success in Iraq,” [L. Paul Bremer III](#), the former Iraqi occupation administrator, said in an interview. “It’s not a complete success yet, obviously, but building democracy takes time.”

He added that “a successful Arab-Muslim democracy basically puts the lie to the Islamic extremists” who maintain that democracy is anathema to Islam and advocate a harsh form of rule.

[Stephen J. Hadley](#), who was Mr. Bush’s national security adviser, said the current transition was due to the surge ordered by the former president and opposed by Mr. Obama when he was a senator. But he said he was glad that Mr. Obama’s team “has gone through a transition” and that it seemed to be taking pride in accomplishments in Iraq. He said he hoped that the administration would see the task through.

“If they do, they can rightly claim some measure of credit, and I would be the first to give them credit,” Mr. Hadley said. “But they need to stay focused and stay engaged.”

For Mr. Obama, this moment is a reminder of the lesson his predecessor learned after [declaring the end of major combat](#) operations on an aircraft carrier in front of a “Mission Accomplished” banner in 2003. Iraq was a messy war with no tidy end. “There will be no surrender ceremony on the deck of a battleship,” Mr. Bush later concluded.

Mr. Obama has come to the same realization, in almost the exact same words.

“There will be no simple moment of surrender to mark the journey’s end,” he declared last spring.

